

# Festival as Cultural Diplomacy: *Kurultáj* and Its Implementation in Hungary

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## Abstract

Diplomatic endeavours encompass a range of strategies, including the organisation of cultural festivals, which serve not only as a means of engaging a broader audience but also as platforms for expressing a nation's identity. One notable example is the *Kurultáj* festival, which took place in Hungary under the auspices of the *Magyar Turán Alapítvány*. This festival exemplifies the practice of cultural diplomacy, attracting participation from various Central Asian nations. Through cultural diplomacy, participating countries aim to promote their respective national interests within the framework of the *Kurultáj* festival. This article examines the implementation of the *Kurultáj* festival between 2008 and 2022, focusing specifically on its association with neo-propagandist cultural diplomacy. It argues that the *Kurultáj* festival cannot be solely categorised as a manifestation of neo-propagandist cultural diplomacy.

## Keywords

*Kurultáj*, cultural diplomacy, Hungarian Turanism, *Keleti Nyitás*

## Abstrak

*Di era kontemporer saat ini, aktivitas diplomasi dapat dilakukan melalui berbagai kebijakan. Salah satunya adalah dengan mengadakan festival budaya. Selain mampu menjangkau masyarakat luas, festival budaya juga merupakan aspek yang mampu merepresentasikan identitas suatu bangsa. Salah satunya adalah festival Kurultáj yang diadakan di Hongaria oleh yayasan Magyar Turán Alapítvány. Festival tersebut merupakan salah satu contoh dari kegiatan diplomasi budaya, yang diikuti oleh berbagai bangsa Asia Tengah. Terdapat suatu upaya untuk memperjuangkan kepentingan nasional oleh negara-negara yang berpartisipasi pada festival Kurultáj melalui sebuah diplomasi budaya. Artikel ini meneliti*

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*bagaimana implementasi festival Kurultáj pada kurun waktu 2008 hingga 2022 dari sudut pandang diplomasi budaya neo-propagandist. Hasil penelitian menyimpulkan bahwa festival Kurultáj bukan sepenuhnya bentuk dari diplomasi budaya neo-propagandist.*

### ***Kata-kata Kunci***

*Kurultáj, diplomacy budaya, Turanisme Hongaria, Keleti Nyitás*

### **Introduction**

*Kurultáj* – *A Magyar Törzsi Gyűlés* (Hungarian Tribal Assembly) is a festival that celebrates the diverse range of traditions and culture specific to the heritage of nomadic tribes originating from Central Asia or Turkic-Hun nations in general. The festival has its roots in the ‘*Kurultáj*’, a tribal assembly held in 2008 in Hungary ([Kurultaj.hu](http://Kurultaj.hu) n.d.). It was initially attended by delegations through invitations limited to Hungary and Kazakhstan. However, the initial results indicated a success which in turn prompted the organiser to hold the Great *Kurultáj* festival regularly, beginning in 2010. Since then, the Great *Kurultáj* festival has invited various delegations, both representing nation-states (e.g. Hungary, Turkey, Bulgaria) and stateless nations (e.g. Chuvash, Bashkir, Uyghur). The *Kurultáj* festival holds a significant role in preserving a large amount of ancestral heritage currently stored in the Hungarian Natural History Museum. Their cooperation has existed dating back to 2009 following the research in Kazakhstan conducted by András Zsolt Bíró, himself a researcher at the Department of Anthropology of the said museum (Bényei 2022). He later became involved in the *Magyar Turán Alapítvány* and remains there as the president of the board of trustees to this day ([Kurultaj.hu](http://Kurultaj.hu) 2020).

The *Magyar Turán Alapítvány* (Hungarian Turan Foundation) was further formalised to organise the festival. Within this organisation stood a number of scholars and scientists possessing degrees in history, archaeology, anthropology, ethnography, linguistics, and even genetics (Bíró et al. 2009). Regarding the *Kurultáj* festival, allegedly their main agenda revolves around uniting nomadic tribes of Turkic-Hun origins through Turanism. Serving as a pan-nationalistic ideology, Turanism refers to the ideology intended to propel cooperation among Turan nations spread across Eastern Europe up to Asia. Common instances of ethnic groups associated with Turan nations include Hungarians, Turks, Kazakhs, and Mongols. Hungarian Turanism is considered a central European phenomenon that

significantly impacted Hungary during the first half of the 20th century, which was based on ancient tradition and the belief that Hungarians are the descendants of the Huns. Equipped with the purpose of finding the ancestral heritage of Hungarians in ancient times, Turanism itself is currently emerging in public discourse in Hungary, which the *Jobbik Magyarorszáért Mozgalom* (Movement for A Better Hungary) or *Jobbik* for short, employs as a platform to run their political campaign.

Simultaneously, around the same time the Hungarian government led by *Fidesz* and their enigmatic leader Viktor Orbán began to voice their aspiration to improve relations in order to increase trade volume with 'Eastern' nations. The year 2010 marked the beginning of a newly announced Hungarian foreign policy titled *Keleti Nyitás* or Eastern Opening (Bernek 2018). Interestingly, *Jobbik* which also became part of the government has committed financial support to the *Magyar-Turán Közhasznú Alapítvány* as it is known legally, in the form of donations (Magyar Idők 2017). This relationship with the government developed further in 2016 when hundreds of delegations took part in the grand opening of the Great *Kurultáj* held in the Great Hall of the Parliament at the invitation of Sándor Lezsák, the Vice President of the Hungarian Parliament (Magyar Távirati Iroda 2016). With more and more development being demonstrated in the following years involving even broader and more diverse parties, it has come to attention that the Great *Kurultáj* festival along with the *Magyar Turán Alapítvány* might hold a value as a distinct case worth investigating.

This article employs two types of data collection methods. A primary source is obtained through piles of financial statements from *Magyar-Turán Közhasznú Alapítvány*, the main foundation organising the festival, from its inception in 2009 to its most recent report in 2021. Secondary sources include scientific papers and books, think tanks and government reports, and articles from news and media outlets. The data analysis technique used in this article is the descriptive-qualitative analysis technique. The data presented are mainly in qualitative and the rest of quantitative could be interpreted qualitatively in relation to social context (Huddleston, James, and Jamieson 2022).

This article is divided into four main sections as follows: an outline of this article is presented in the Introduction section; the idea of non-state actors in cultural diplomacy is discussed in the Framework section, along with the research techniques employed to apply the concept as an analytical tool; three main topics are further separated into the Discussion section:

Overviews of Turanism and *Kurultáj*, Hungarian politics and relevant policies, and an analysis of the implementation of cultural diplomacy in the *Kurultáj* festival; and conclusions drawn from the study on cultural diplomacy in the *Kurultáj* festival are presented in the Conclusions section. This article argues that the adherence of the *Kurultáj* festival to the particular Hungarian Turanism helps to spur closer cooperation with other Turan nations which also benefits the interests of the government, critically the *Keleti Nyitás* foreign policy. Thanks to their generosity, the *Magyar Turán Alapítvány* could expand rapidly and become one of the most significant non-state actors advancing Hungarian culture abroad. Government involvement coupled with further analysis would posit the *Kurultáj* festival under the neo-propagandist category proposed by Zamorano in his research concerning cultural diplomacy.

### **Non-State Actors within Cultural Diplomacy**

In the realm of international politics, a string of events starts from actions and decisions taken by so-called ‘actors.’ The actors in this context refer to entities, be they individuals or institutions possessing agency capacity in exerting influence on political affairs. Such capacity may come in the form of access to resources, information, and others that determine the background of the actors and result in their influence (Huijgh 2016). Actors in international politics may refer to individual or institutional entities officially affiliated with a certain nation. Such are classified as state actors. Beyond that, there exists another type of actors in international politics not officially affiliated with a certain nation, pursuing objectives and interests that often represent multiple actors simultaneously. Such are classified as non-state actors (Nye 2019). As such, non-state actors could conduct diplomacy independent of their nations of origin.

As for contemporary discussions, there has been a lack of a universally accepted definition of cultural diplomacy among scholars. Such is further hampered by the fact in which cultural diplomacy stands, whether a part of public diplomacy or more equally positioned alongside public diplomacy itself (Lähdesmäki 2021). The cultural diplomacy defined in Zamorano's (2016) article entitled “Reframing Cultural Diplomacy: The Instrumentalization of Culture under the Soft Power Theory” resulted from the use of culture in a country's foreign policy strategy leading to the emergence of two quite contrasting categories of cultural diplomacy, culturalist and neo-propagandist respectively. The culturalist or reflexive type is characterised by a fairly diverse policy of cultural representation focusing

on cultural exchange and mutual understanding. Meanwhile, the neo-propagandist type refers to the use of culture as the subject of political and economic ‘instrumentalisation’ by the government in projecting cultural representation outwards (Zamorano 2016). Moreover, within the context of culturalist and neo-propagandist cultural diplomacy, six distinguishing variables are identified and presented in Table 1.

Variables	Cultural Diplomacy	
	Culturalist	Neo-propagandist
Aims	Mutual Understanding	Power/Persuasion
Message Control	Weak	Strong
Social Participation	High	Low
Pattern of Communication	Two-ways	One-way
Results	Relative	Specific
Audience Character	Active	Passive

Table 1 Cultural Diplomacy

### Identifying Preconditions for Cultural Diplomacy within *Kurultáj* Festival

#### *Turanism and Kurultáj*

The language spoken by native Hungarians, *Magyar*, possesses a higher degree of complexity with its synthetic and specifically agglutinative nature, unlike the overwhelming majority of languages native to Europe. To establish a national identity, Hungarians adhered to their ancient chronicles and heroic legends such as the *Gesta Hungarorum* (The Deeds of the Hungarians) and the *Gesta Hunnorum et Hungarorum* (The Deeds of the Huns and Hungarians) while resisting the influence of the native Germans, Slavs, and other European nations (Dayioğlu 2022). However, a German linguist, Johann Eberhard Fischer suggested that *Magyar* belonged to the Finno-Ugric group in 1768, posing a serious challenge to the prevailing belief in the Turkic-Hun connection or the broader Ural-Altai language family (Akçali and Korkut 2012). Ármin Vámbéry, an esteemed

Turkologist, played a significant role in the subsequent *Ugor-Török Háború* (Ugric-Turkish War). Despite Vámbéry acknowledged the Finno-Ugric propositions eventually, the Ural-Altai thesis managed to persist in mainstream discourse until the beginning of the 20th century (Ablonczy 2021).

Turanism emerged as a response to perceived threats from European powers, a nationalist movement aiming to foster cooperation among people who share ethnic or linguistic connections to Central Asia. As Géza Nagy associated the term “Turanian” with “Ural-Altai” in 1895, he considered the Turan people as Central Asian nomads akin to the Huns, Cumans, Magyars, Tatars, Turks, Kyrgyz and even Koreans and Japanese (Dayioğlu 2022). Three key elements contributed to the development of Hungarian Turanism: the search for related languages, the mixture of attraction and fear experienced by Hungarian elites regarding pan-political movements encompassing multiple countries or continents, and lastly, the imperial aspirations to expand Hungarian cultural, economic, and political influence into new territories (Ablonczy 2021).

*Turáni Társaság* (Turanian Society) was established in 1910 by a group of prominent academics, politicians, and nobles of Hungarian Turanism. It aimed to study, promote, and advance the national cultures and economies of the Ural-Altai peoples of Europe and Asia, who share connections with Hungarians (Ablonczy 2021). The *Turáni Társaság* was actively engaged in public lectures, language courses, expeditions, and the publication of the journal *Turán*. Starting in 1913, the society began publishing *Turán* in French, Hungarian, German, and Turkish, containing accounts of anthropological and research expeditions to investigate the economic, cultural, social, and linguistic conditions in territories like Anatolia, the Caspian Sea region, the Caucasus, and the Inner Asian land (Korkut 2017). However, the consequences of World War I ultimately disrupted the Turanist movement. Their endeavours were short-lived as the outbreak of World War II and the subsequent Cold War era under Communist rule severely curtailed socio-political movements for nearly 45 years in Hungary (Balogh 2020).

The *Magyar Turán Alapítvány*, led by András Zsolt Bíró, a Hungarian anthropologist affiliated with the Hungarian Museum of Natural History (MTTM), emerged as the most prominent and significant Turanist organisation post-Cold War in Hungary (Kowalczyk 2017). Bíró led a collaborative Hungarian-Kazakh research, embarking on an expedition focused on gathering ethnographic and genetic data on the Madjar tribe

situated in the north-western Torgaï region in Kazakhstan (Moreh 2016). They concluded that the *Magyars* and the Madjars share a genetic relationship, serving as the primary evidence substantiating the genetic affinity between the two (Bíró et al. 2009). Inspired by the findings, Bíró planned to organise a festival within Hungary with like-minded individuals. In certain Altaic languages, the term *Kurultai* signifies a “meeting of the tribes,” an event commonly observed within nomadic communities. The primary aim of the *Kurultáj* is to cultivate a shared sense of solidarity between the Hungarian people and the nomadic peoples of Central Asia (Kowalczyk 2017). The inaugural *Magyarországi Kurultáj* took place in 2008 at Bösztörpuszta, followed by the institutionalisation of contemporary Turanism in 2009 through establishing the *Magyar Turán Alapítvány* and the *Magyar Turán Szövetség* (Hungarian Turan Association).

The festival was then superseded by the *Nagykurultáj*, which took place biennially since 2010. The *Nagykurultáj* not only served as a platform to strengthen ties with the Madjar tribe from Kazakhstan, but as a gathering point for various nations embracing Hun and Turk consciousness (Simon-Nanko 2017). Throughout the event, attendees had the opportunity to witness captivating performances by warrior re-enactors, traditional folk dances, engaging archaeological exhibitions, and enlightening lectures. All things considered, the *Nagykurultáj* offers a unique experience for its participants. They can enjoy the desert weather, the starry sky, the lively crowds, the folk music, the tented camp, and the intercultural exchange with the eastern guests and their culture. The morning ambience, accompanied by the sounds of whips and horses, evokes a sense of transcendence. However, it is worth noting that the *Magyar Tudományos Akadémia* (Hungarian Academy of Sciences–MTA) does not attribute significant importance to the event as a prominent subculture. The scientific community, particularly in the fields of archaeology and linguistics, tends to overlook the actual changes in the Hungarian societal and political landscape (Simon-Nanko 2017).

### *Hungarian Politics and Relevant Policies*

Hungary's peaceful transition from communism to democracy saw the following parties enter parliament: *Magyar Szocialista Párt* (Hungarian Socialist Party-MSZP), successor to *Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt* (Hungarian Socialist Workers Party-MSZMP); *Magyar Demokrata Fórum* (Hungarian Democratic Forum-MDF); *Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége* (Alliance of Free Democrats-SZDSZ); and *Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége*

(Alliance of Young Democrats-Fidesz) led by Viktor Orbán (Vegetti 2019). The conservative MDF emerged victorious in the 1990 election, but MSZP achieved victory in the 1994 election by adopting neoliberal principles. To counter this, *Fidesz* began its shift to the right (Murer 2015). Transforming from a liberal youth party to a conservative people's party, *Fidesz* won and formed a right-wing government in the 1998 election. 2003 marked the foundation of the *Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom* (Movement for a Better Hungary–*Jobbik*), itself a wordplay implying both “better” and “further to the right” (Pap and Glied 2018).

Despite the Left-liberal coalition returning to power in 2002 and 2006, their popularity suffered a severe blow in the subsequent years. The government implemented drastic austerity measures to address the large state deficits accumulating since the previous legislature, and the media exposed numerous corruption scandals involving MSZP and SZDSZ officials throughout the term. Their downfall culminated in the *Őszödi beszéd* (Őszöd speech, as delivered at the 2006 MSZP congress in Balatonőszöd), where a recording of a speech delivered by the prime minister from MSZP, Ferenc Gyurcsány, to his own party members was leaked on the national radio a few months after the election. He confessed to having “lied in the morning, at noon and at night” about the true state of the Hungarian economy to win the elections, using strong and vulgar language (Kim 2016).

The 2010 election was a decisive moment in Hungary's political history. *Fidesz* won a sweeping victory with 53 per cent of the vote and a supermajority of over two-thirds of the parliamentary seats, while *Jobbik* emerged as the third-largest party with nearly 17 per cent of the vote securing 47 seats (Murer 2015). *Fidesz* and its leader, Orbán, promised to use their overwhelming electoral mandate to eliminate the “socialist heritage” of the previous eight years and to redevelop the Hungarian economy (Péter 2015). The new government in power saw the necessity for a significant shift in foreign policy, influenced by the GFC at the end of the previous decade and its impact on Hungary. Concerning the strategy, both *Jobbik* and *Fidesz* desire that Hungary should be a transfer station between East and West. To achieve this, *Jobbik* chose the ideological path, opting to revive Turanism in public discourse (Pap and Glied 2018). Meanwhile, the *Fidesz*-led government acknowledged the economic rise of India and China, creating a “totally new situation for the whole of Western civilisation,” which they should consider when designing their new foreign policy. The expression used in the speech was *Keleti Szél* (eastern wind),



and only after its diffusion in media rhetoric did *Keleti Nyitás* (eastward opening) become part of the official governmental discourse (Moreh 2016).

*Keleti Nyitás* could be seen as more of a collection of measures and gestures directed towards Eastern countries, aimed at attracting investments to Hungary and seeking financial support for its debt. Orbán intended to allow the budget deficit to reach 7-8 per cent of the GDP as a means to stimulate economic growth. However, such measure encountered opposition from the EU, which imposed regulations requiring current and future eurozone members to maintain a budget deficit below 3 percent of GDP. Consequently, Hungary's foreign policy faced criticism from the EU, leading to an increasing shift in the country's foreign relations towards Eastern countries (Tarrósy and Vörös 2014). Furthermore, as per the statement of Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó, *Keleti Nyitás* rests upon four primary principles. These pillars encompass the subsequent key aspects: Firstly, fostering robust connections with the Far East, with a special emphasis on the People's Republic of China (PRC). Second, bolstering cooperation with nations in the Caucasus region, namely Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan, owing to their trade strategies aligning with Hungary's market supply structure. Third, prioritising and elevating trade relations with Arab countries. Lastly, directing significant attention towards the Western Balkans region (Korkut 2017).

The outlined trends suggest that certain significant groups within Hungarian society, despite being influenced by Indo-European culture for centuries, still experience a sense of detachment from their European counterparts, and conversely desire to cultivate connections with nations beyond their immediate region, particularly focusing on what they perceive as their ancestral origins. Cultural gatherings involving the participation of diverse nations play a pivotal role in nurturing these relationships. Notably, these nations are predominantly the same ones that the government aims to foster closer collaboration with.

### **The Implementation of Cultural Diplomacy within *Kurultáj* Festival**

#### *Aims*

The *Kurultáj* festival in Hungary, rooted in Turanism, has undergone significant transformations over time. Originally, Turanism in late 19th-century Hungary aligned with Hungarian imperialism (Ablonczy 2021). However, the *Kurultáj* festival emerged as an independent and non-political initiative driven by civil society, aimed at exploring the cultural heritage of Central Asian nomadic tribes. It sought to foster unity

among the Hungarian nation, and Eastern peoples with shared kinship ties, and preserve nomadic traditions (Csörsz 2015).

Although Turanism became associated with the political agenda of Jobbik (Kim 2016), the relationship between *Kurultáj* and *Jobbik* is complex and has evolved. The visual presence of *Jobbik* gradually diminished from 2014 to 2018 (Magyar Idők 2017), as the festival aimed to present a ‘non-political’ image, appealing to a broader Hungarian audience and visiting diplomatic delegations from Turkey and Central Asia. The Hungarian government (*Fidesz*) utilised *Kurultáj* as a cultural diplomatic platform, known as *Keleti Nyitás*, to engage with Turan partner countries (Kremmler 2022).

In an interview in 2018, András Zsolt Bíró, president of *Magyar Turán Alapítvány*, described the *Kurultáj* festival he organised as “an international cultural and diplomatic meeting where we strengthen and celebrate the unity of nations with a shared equestrian nomadic past,” adding that “delegations of our Eastern kindred nations are present here, all nations with Hun and Turk consciousness” (Sengel 2018). Furthermore, when asked about the important international relations that have been established by the foundation and festival in an interview in 2020, Bíró emphasised that:

Our main partners are Turkic-speaking independent states: Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia. We work closely with the Turkish Council, I am a member of the International Turkish Academy. We maintain contact with organisations and representatives of the 18 Turkic- and Mongol-speaking peoples living in the territory of the Russian Federation, in particular, with colleagues in Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, Yakutia, the Altai Republic, Tuva, Khakassia, Buryatia, Kalmykia. We also have connections with Uyghur diaspora organisations living in different countries (Popper 2020).

In its current context, Turanism within the *Kurultáj* festival and *Magyar Turán Alapítvány* serves as a means to foster cooperation and mutual understanding among nation-states. The focus is enhancing

diplomatic relations and fostering collaboration, rather than asserting dominance over the 'kindred' Turan nations.

### *Message Control*

*Kurultáj* began as a follow-up to the collaborative Hungarian-Kazakh research initiative studying the genetics between the tribe known as the "Madjar" in Kazakhstan and the *Magyars* residing in the Carpathian Basin. It serves as the primary, scientific evidence substantiating the genetic affinity between the two peoples, which set everything in motion and resulted in the *Kurultáj* festival. Bíró and fellow scholars concluded that:

Genetic distances based on haplogroup frequencies were used to compare the Madjars with 37 other populations and showed that they were closest to the Hungarian population rather than their geographical neighbours. Although this finding could result from chance, it is striking and suggests that there could have been genetic contact between the ancestors of the Madjars and Magyars, and thus that modern Hungarians may trace their ancestry to Central Asia, instead of the Eastern Uralic region as previously thought (Bíró et al. 2009).

Turanism is undoubtedly a very important part of *Jobbik's* activity, which became obvious when analysing the party's vision of Hungarian foreign policy. Purportedly, Bíró himself was maintaining close relations with *Jobbik* and was awarded "*Pongrátz Gergely-érdemkereszt*" in January 2013 for his previous "non-partisan and exemplary" scientific research (Magyar Távirati Iroda 2013a). During *Nagykurultáj* 2014, the festival witnessed the participation of Gábor Vona, the leader of *Jobbik*, while Márton Gyöngyösi, an MP from *Jobbik* and a member of the National Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee, delivered a lecture titled "The Strategic Importance of Hungarian Foreign Policy Relations with the East" as a guest speaker (Bartalis 2014).

In support of *Fidesz's* key policy on *Keleti Nyitás*, Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister of Hungary and chairman of *Fidesz*, attended the World Nomad Games with Bíró in 2018 in Kyrgyzstan. The move symbolically established Bíró's role as the *de facto* commissioner of the Hungarian government's cultural diplomacy with Central Asia (Kremmler 2022).

Later, it was revealed in 2019, that two ministries under the *Fidesz* government started to provide financial support for the broader *Magyar-Turán Közhasznú Alapítvány* upwards of 300 million forints (c.a. 875,000 USD) for the year 2018 alone (Borbás 2019).

Besides the *Erőforrások Minisztériuma* (Ministry of Human Resources-EMMI) and the *Külgazdasági és Külügyminisztérium* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade-KKM), there were other financial contributors in 2016. Surprisingly, the *Gyarapodó Magyarországért Alapítvány*, affiliated with *Jobbik*, donated 5 million forints, which is five times more than the support provided by EMMI, a government ministry (*Magyar-Turán Közhasznú Alapítvány* 2017). Adding to the list of beneficiaries, the *Magyar Turán Alapítvány* received grants from the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TICA/TİKA) in 2016-2017. TICA operates under the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism and, interestingly, in 2016, it granted more funds than KKM (*Magyar-Turán Közhasznú Alapítvány* 2017). TİKA, established in 1992, has played a significant role in the development of the *Kurultáj* festival, especially from 2014 to 2018 (Kremmler 2022).

The *Kurultáj* festival, in collaboration with the *Magyar Turán Alapítvány*, engages multiple stakeholders in its functioning and implementation. The festival's interconnectedness with non-state actors, exemplified by individuals like András Zsolt Bíró, fosters a dynamic environment wherein supporters of Turanism, including government agencies and political parties, influence the festival's role as an instrument of cultural diplomacy.

### *Social Participation*

As a cultural festival, *Kurultáj* presents a unique experience for its participants. The opportunity to enjoy the desert weather, the starry sky, the lively crowds, the folk music, the tented camp, and the intercultural exchange with the Eastern guests and their culture. The festival's popularity has been recognised by visitors of Turan origin, from the people of Kyrgyzstan to the Turkish diaspora in Germany (Billay 2022). This popularity manifests itself in the form of participation, which indicates an increase in numbers over the years.

At its debut in 2008, the *Magyarországi Kurultáj* festival attracted between 40,000 and 45,000 visitors. At the first *Nagykurultáj* in Bugac in 2010, the number of visitors more than doubled to around 130,000 (*Magyar-Turán Közhasznú Alapítvány* 2022). At the IV. *Kurultáj* in 2012,

around 152,000-155,000 visitors were recorded (Kurultáj.hu 2012b). In 2014, the number of visitors increased again to around 180,000-185,000 people. At the next event in 2016, the *Kurultáj* festival attracted around 210,000-220,000 visitors (Magyar-Turán Közhasznú Alapítvány 2022). On the 10th anniversary of *Kurultáj* in 2018, around 210,000 visitors attended the three-day festival (Kurultáj.hu 2018a). At the last organised *Kurultáj* in 2022, an estimated 200,000 visitors attended the festival (Bakró-Nagy 2022).

During its debut in 2008, the festival successfully invited 40 delegations from Kazakhstan, primarily composed of Madjar ethnic tribe members (Kurultáj.hu n.d.). In the inaugural *Nagykurultáj* in 2010, approximately 250 delegates from various Turan ethnic groups were present at the festival (Magyar-Turán Közhasznú Alapítvány 2022). By 2012, the number of delegates increased to 284, representing 25 Turan ethnic groups from the Carpathian Basin and surrounding regions (Morva 2020). In the following event in 2014, the festival attracted participation from 306 delegates representing 27 Turan ethnic groups (Homoly 2014). Although the number of attending delegations from the Turan ethnic groups remained consistent, the overall number of participants in the *Kurultáj* festival grew to around 400 individuals by the year 2018 (Kurultáj.hu 2018a).

This escalation in visitor numbers over the years reflects the festival's continually expanding popularity and the high level of interest demonstrated by the public towards the event. Additionally, the diversity of participants hailing from various Turan ethnic groups highlights the increasingly widespread inclusivity and elevated level of engagement within the *Kurultáj* festival.

### *Pattern of Communication*

As previously mentioned, it is undeniable that the narrative *Kurultáj* brought aligns with Jobbik's political agenda to revitalise Turanism and serves as a valuable tool for *Fidesz* and *Keleti Nyitás* in establishing their new foreign policy foundation. Consequently, both political entities strive to maintain a controlled historical narrative and the origins of the Hungarian nation in public discourse, steering it in their desired direction.

For instance, Tamás Hegedűs, a prominent *Jobbik* MP who also chaired the Hungarian-Turkish Friendship Section of Parliament, hosted the delegation of the Hungarian-Turkish Chamber of Commerce and its president, Suat Karakuş, in parliament in June 2011. On the occasion, András Zsolt Bíró was also invited to review the results of cultural,

political, and scientific cooperation in the years 2010-2011. It was also on this occasion that Karakuş mentioned: “Hungary should approach Turkey [...] not only for business reasons but also because of its common origin and common roots,” since “we are all grandchildren of Attila, descendants of the Huns” (Kurultáj.hu 2011).

On 11th March 2013, during the general session of the National Parliament, *Jobbik* proposed the establishment of the *Turáni Rokon Népek Napja* (Day of Turanian Kindred Peoples) as a national holiday, to be observed on 7th January, coinciding with Attila’s Day (Vona, Hegedüs, and Gyöngyösi 2013). Unfortunately, on 8th April 2013, the parliament passed a different proposal, designating the *Finnugor Nyelvrokonsággal Rendelkező Népek Napja* (Finno-Ugric Ethnicity Day) every third Saturday of October. Dissatisfied with the parliament’s rejection, *Jobbik* intensified their efforts to adopt the historical narrative and origins of the Hungarian nation relating to the Turan nations. The following is an excerpt from Gábor Vona’s speech delivered during the general session of the National Parliament on 22nd April 2013:

... You [the speaker and members of parliament] have also heard of Kurultáj, which is attended by hundreds of thousands of people, and you have heard of numerous heritage preservation associations and organisations. For these individuals, this is a completely legitimate social need, and we are here in the Parliament to represent those people who have sent us here. Another thing, perhaps a subjective matter: national unity cannot be achieved through Finno-Ugricism. However, by stating that we are the descendants of Attila’s grandchildren, the descendants of a Turanian warrior nation, we can indeed unite the increasingly fragmented, torn, and dispersed Hungarian nation that has migrated to different parts of the world. Every nation needs an origin myth. Our origin myth is not that of a Finno-Ugric hunting and fishing people, but rather that we are the descendants of a Turanian warrior nation. I request your support in finally making this truth happen here in the Parliament, and let us relegate the historical falsehoods to where they belong—in the history books (Országgyűlés 2013).

Meanwhile, the government led by Viktor Orbán and key figures within *Fidesz*, such as László Kövér, the Speaker of the National Assembly, actively supported the festival since 2012. On various occasions, he played a role in delivering the opening speeches for the *Kurultáj* festival, starting from 2018 up to the most recent one in 2022. Additionally, Sándor Lezsák, a local Member of Parliament and Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly since 2006, assumes the position of patron for *Kurultáj*.

In their most elaborate effort, the presentations at the *Kurultáj* festival have encompassed various disciplines such as population genetics, archaeogenetics, palaeoanthropology, archaeology, and ethnography, led by renowned researchers affiliated with esteemed institutions like the MTA, MTTM, and the *Szegedi Tudományegyetem* (University of Szeged–SZTE). In 2016, the Turan narrative garnered scientific support from two genetic experts at SZTE, namely Tibor Török and Endre Neparáczki. They identified the genetic relationship with Central Asia from 9th-century burials scattered throughout Hungary, publishing their findings in PLoS ONE and serving as guest lecturers at *Kurultáj* (Neparáczki et al. 2018). In 2019, the narrative was formally acknowledged by the Hungarian government through the establishment of a new research institution, the *Magyarságkutató Intézet* (Institute of Hungarian Studies–MKI). Several prominent figures involved in the *Kurultáj* festival assumed positions within the institute, including Neparáczki, who leads the Archaeogenetic Research Centre, and Török as the chief researcher (Magyarságkutató Intézet 2019).

Zsolt Bernert and Sándor Évinger are anthropologists who were actively involved in curating an exhibition of skulls and maps for the *Kurultáj* festival (Bartalis 2014). They began presenting their work for MKI in 2019, culminating in July when Bernert was appointed as the new director of MTTM (Magyar Narancs 2019). In October 2019, in collaboration with the *Magyar Turán Alapítvány*, Bernert showcased the narrative of the Hun-Avar-Magyar ancestors to MTTM through an exhibition titled *Attila Örökösei–A hunoktól az Árpád-házig* (Heirs of Attila: From the Huns to the Árpád House). During the opening ceremony, representatives from the Embassies of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia posed in front of the *Kurultáj* banner, symbolising their support (Kremmler 2022).

The festival *Kurultáj*, in the context of patterns of communication similar to message control, advocates Turanism and close ties to ‘kindred’ nations from the East, which has led both *Jobbik* and the *Fidesz*-led

government to extend their unequivocal support unilaterally. Consequently, efforts have been made to perpetuate ‘everyday geopolitics’ in various forms and time frames, ranging from public support to encompassing the scientific field, as evident in the establishment of MKI.

### *Results*

For the Hungarian government, especially *Jobbik* and *Fidesz*, the *Kurultáj* festival serves as a cultural diplomacy tool as part of their *Keleti Nyitás* foreign policy. The festival honours kinship, and nomadic traditions, and establishes connections with other Turan ethnicities in the Central-Eastern Asian region. These events align with the *Keleti Nyitás* policy objectives, aiming to open new export markets and strengthen geo-economic ties in the eastern region.

In December 2012, the *Magyar Turán Alapítvány*, represented by András Zsolt Bíró, embarked on a visit to Turkey upon the invitation of the *Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi* (Grand National Assembly of Turkey–TBMM). He was received by Dr. Selçuk Özdağ, a Member of Parliament and a member of the Youth and Sports Cabinet, after which Özdağ underscored the pivotal role of *Kurultáj* in preserving Hungary’s national traditions and its impact on youth development (Kurultaj.hu 2012a). Subsequently, in February 2013, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then Prime Minister of Turkey, paid an official visit to Budapest. On this occasion, he touched upon the shared historical background and the linguistic and familial ties between Hungary and Turkey, and his support for the policy of *Keleti Nyitás* (Magyar Távirati Iroda 2013b).

With the support of the *Magyar Turán Alapítvány* and the *Kurultáj* festival, Hungary successfully attained observer status in the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic States (TURKPA) in 2014 (Raushan 2014). That same year, TURKPA member states sent larger delegations to the *Kurultáj* festival (Kurultaj.hu 2014c). Additionally, Kazakh Minister of Culture, Arystanbek Muhamediuly, inaugurated the Hun exhibition held in the “Attila’s Tent” during the festival. In March 2015, a delegation of government officials from Hungary, accompanied by a hundred businessmen, conducted an official three-day visit to Kazakhstan. A meeting between the two prime ministers, organised by the Secretariat of the Prime Minister of Kazakhstan, entrusted the *Magyar Turán Alapítvány* with the vibrant implementation of Hungarian cultural programs as a closing ceremony (Kurultaj.hu 2015).

In June 2016, Bíró undertook a visit to Kyrgyzstan, during which he



engaged in discussions with Sapar Isakov, the Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan. Bíró also met Maksutov Altynbek Askarovich, the Kyrgyz Minister of Culture, who personally will attend the 2016 *Kurultáj* festival in Bugac (Kurultáj.hu 2016). Following the developments in the relations between Hungary and the Turan nations, a declaration of scientific cooperation and cultural agreement between the International Turkic Academy, represented by the Kazakhstani embassy, and the *Magyar Turán Alapítvány* was signed during the *Nagykurultáj* 2018 (Kurultáj.hu 2018b). Hungary was also invited as an honorary guest to the 6th Summit of the Cooperation Council of the Turkic Speaking States (Turkic Council, now Organisation of Turkic States–OTS) in 2018 in Kyrgyzstan, which eventually led to Hungary's attainment of observer status within OTS. Moreover, Budapest was selected as the location for the European Representation Office of the OTS (Yüzbaşıoğlu 2019).

In October 2021, the Kyrgyz Foreign Minister, Ruslan Kazakbaev, and the Hungarian Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister, Péter Szijjártó, jointly celebrated the Turkish Cooperation and Unity Day at the European Representation Office of the OTS. Notably, on this occasion, the symbolic inauguration of the Kyrgyzstan Embassy in Budapest took place (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic 2021). During his address, Kazakbaev emphasised that besides the friendly relations and strategic partnership, “our shared past, ancestors, and heritage connect us as kindred nations” (Kurultáj.hu 2021a). Subsequently, in November 2021, it was Bíró's turn to visit Uzbekistan, where he was welcomed by Avazjon Karimov, the Deputy Minister of Sports and Tourism. During their meeting, they engaged in a dialogue concerning the development of relations in traditional sports, cooperation in equestrian sports and equestrian tourism, as well as Uzbekistan's official high-level participation in the *Kurultáj* 2022 festival (Kurultáj.hu 2021b).

As a cultural diplomacy instrument, aimed at serving national interests, András Zsolt Bíró, the *Magyar Turán Alapítvány*, and the *Kurultáj* festival have been operating in a coordinated synergy to establish connections with other Turanian ethnic groups in the regions of Central to Eastern Asia. The Hungarian government prioritises *Keleti Nyitás* foreign policy to access new markets and strengthen geo-economic ties, especially in Eastern territories. Fostering close diplomatic relations with Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, TURKPA, OTS, and relevant organisations is essential for achieving specific outcomes aligned with *Keleti Nyitás'* policy objectives.

### *Audience Character*

In June 2010, a local *Kurultaj* commenced in Ufa, the capital of Bashkortostan. Each region was represented by a delegation comprising approximately 30 individuals, and the event was supported by the government. Several Turan ethnic groups participated, including Hungary, making its inaugural appearance. András Zsolt Bíró, the primary organiser of the *Kurultáj*, became an esteemed representative of Hungary and was received by the head of state, garnering significant media attention (Kurultáj.hu 2010). Subsequently, in May 2012, Bíró was invited as an honorary guest to the *Asrlar Sadosy* (Voice of Centuries), also referred to as Uzbek *Kurultaj* which took place in the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan. Through dialogues with local officials, Bíró successfully reached an agreement to include the Karakalpak tribe as guest delegates in the *Kurultáj*. Following this, he engaged in discussions with the Uzbek Ministry of Culture regarding the participation of Uzbekistan delegates in the *Kurultáj* (Kurultáj.hu 2012c).

In June 2014, the event *Kurultaj-Hungarian Day* was held in the historical fortress area of İçeri Şəhər in Baku by the Azerbaijani government. The *Magyar Turán Alapítvány* sent a delegation of 13 members, where visitors could enjoy concerts, combat demonstrations, and public lectures. The members of the *Magyar Turán Alapítvány* were ceremoniously welcomed in the city of Tovuz, while the *Magyar Turán Szövetség* team performed combat demonstrations, reviving ancient martial arts cultures. A joint press conference was organised, and speeches were delivered by Bíró and Ganira Pashayeva, representatives from the Tovuz region in the Azeri Parliament (Kurultáj.hu 2014b). In September 2019, a delegation of 9 members from the *Magyar Turán Alapítvány* visited Dobruzdza upon the invitation of the Turkish-Tatar Democracy Association of Romania, to attend a cultural event known as the Turco-Tatar Kurultai. Various invited ethnic groups included Tatars from Tatarstan (Kazan), Kazakhstan, Tatar Bulgaria, Turkey, and Hungary. Following a banquet held together, representatives from the *Magyar Turán Alapítvány* discussed potential future collaborations and extended an invitation for the hosts to attend *Kurultáj 2020* (Kurultáj.hu 2019).

Besides organisations and foundations from various Turan nations, the *Kurultáj* festival and *Magyar Turán Alapítvány* have also garnered interest from various preservers of traditions and cultures in other parts of the world. In April 2014, Zoltán Sólyomfi-Nagy, one of the ritual leaders of *Kurultáj* and also an educator, received an invitation to give a guest lecture at the University of Sanskrit Uttarakhand, Haridwar, India. The lecture

revolved around *Kurultáj* as the Hungarian Tribal Assembly and the efforts made to preserve ancestral traditions in Hungary. The main organiser of the conference, an Indian biology professor, had visited Hungary multiple times to study further the preservation and practice of ancient Hungarian traditions (Kurultáj.hu 2014a).

In addition, *Magyar Turán Alapítvány* was honoured as one of the guests at the Eurasia-Altai Cultural Festival held in Seoul, South Korea, in September 2017. This festival showcased the Turan kinship, including Hungary and the *Kurultáj* festival. Representatives from *Kurultáj* Korea, Hande Kavarnali, and Cho Sung Hee, were responsible for organising the event with the support of the Eurasian Turan Culture and Economic Institution and the Seoul Municipal Government. Within the festival, there was a separate pavilion dedicated to Hungary, with a focus on *Kurultáj* and other works by *Magyar Turán Alapítvány*, as well as the cultural heritage of nations originating from the Altai and Turan regions. The Eurasia-Altai Cultural Festival presented an opportunity for *Magyar Turán Alapítvány* to participate and introduce the Hungarian cultural heritage and *Kurultáj* to the international community present in Seoul (Kurultáj.hu 2017).

## Conclusion

This article has described that the *Kurultáj- A Magyar Törzsi Gyűlés* festival can be considered a manifestation of cultural diplomacy with neo-propagandist tendencies, but its implementation also includes elements of the culturalist category. Furthermore, concerning the six supporting parameters of the typology of cultural diplomacy, the implementation of Hungarian cultural diplomacy in the *Kurultáj* festival is as follows: It is cultural diplomacy aimed at mutual understanding, thus possessing a culturalist nature, manifested through Hungary's contemporary foreign policy of *Keleti Nyitás* and Turanism; subsequently, the strong message control, based on the involvement of *Jobbik* and *Fidesz* in various aspects, exhibits a neo-propagandist character, although the high social participation of diverse Turan ethnicities tends to be culturalists; as seen in the one-way communication pattern, *Kurultáj* led towards neo-propagandist cultural diplomacy, as evident from the narratives presented by the international political actors of Hungary; *Kurultáj* operates in a coordinated manner to achieve specific outcomes with other Turan ethnicities in the regions of Central to Eastern Asia, which tend to be neo-propagandist in line with the objectives of the *Keleti Nyitás* policy; and lastly, the *Kurultáj* festival, rooted in the kinship between Kazakhstan and Hungary, has

evolved into a transnational and sustainable cultural event, with active audience participation inviting organisers to engage in activities for the preservation of traditions and other cultural aspects.

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